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512 pages

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# Neil Young, *Waging Heavy Peace: A Hippie's Dream*, New York, Penguin Group, Blue Rider Press, 2012, 512 pages

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- 1 Although he claimed that he would never write an autobiography, Neil Young's memoirs *Waging Heavy Peace: A Hippie Dream* were published in November 2012. The book has been tremendously well received: it was described by *The New Orleans Times-Picayune* as a "satisfying read for the true fan," and by countercultural website *dangerousminds.net* as being "like an eagle soaring through time." This work is Young's first book, and was written when he was 65, at a time when he felt a musical dry spell after having stopped drinking and taking drugs. It spans over Young's 45-year career as well as his childhood and teenage years.
- 2 Canadian folk and rock artist Neil Young was born in 1945 in Toronto, and moved to Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1960. There, he began playing music and started his musical career with The Squire in 1963. He then moved to the United States, joined Buffalo Springfield (who became famous with their protest song hit "For What It's Worth,") and later folk superband Crosby, Stills, and Nash. "Ohio" is one of his best-known songs with them, as it denounced the May 4th, 1970 shootings of four students at Kent State University by the National Guard. He eventually started a solo career, and reached worldwide fame with his *Harvest* album in 1972. He also toured extensively, either as a solo act or with his backing band, Crazy Horse. His latest album, *Psychedelic Pill*, was recorded with Crazy Horse and released in October 2012. Neil Young will be touring Europe with his band throughout the summer.
- 3 Neil Young's autobiography is surprising both in the nature of the themes that he deals with and in the way it is structured. Far from the chronological memoir format of the recent autobiography of the Who's guitar player Pete Townshend, *Who I Am*, Neil Young depicts his life and career, and exposes his ideas and reflections in non-chronological

order. Moreover, he also does it in a way that may—at first—seem unconventional to the fans hoping to be transported back in time to the 1960s and the 1970s.

- 4 The non-chronological aspect is at first very disturbing, as the story told may easily be hard to follow, especially if the reader is not familiar with the artist's life. Artists' biographies and autobiographies, such as Keith Richards' first autobiography *Life* in 2010, usually follow a clear chronological order or deal with a precisely delimited time period. For instance, Paul McCartney—with his friend and English author Barry Miles—decided to tackle only his youth and career with the Beatles in *Many Years From Now*, while Pete Townshend wrote his autobiography himself, dealing with all aspects of his life and career, from his birth to his career with the Who, the films he was involved with, or his solo albums and touring. Both McCartney and Townshend narrate their story in chronological order. On the contrary, *Waging Heavy Peace* may sometimes be confusing to go through. Dates are seldom mentioned, which makes any form of continuity in Young's career sometimes difficult to comprehend. While one chapter deals with his playing with Crosby, Stills and Nash, the following one may very well raise the issue of his relative estrangement from his father during his early teens. Nevertheless, once accepted by the reader, such format makes *Waging Heavy Peace* marvelously driving and pleasant to read. What this book lacks in continuity thus compensates in dynamism. Moreover, that impression is reinforced by the language Young uses throughout his autobiography. Being sarcastic, one could easily say that no ghost writer was involved in this work, since the range of adjectives varies little from "nice," to "good," and "great." At some point in his book, Neil Young himself explains: "Canadians say 'great' a lot, in case you haven't noticed. I know. I haven't looked up many other words I could have used in the Thesaurus, but that is not my style. I prefer to be boring and use the same words over and over, because that is more true to who I really am" (272).
- 5 Such a lack of fancy literary style conveys, however, a feeling of profound sincerity and spontaneity to this work, as Neil Young wrote this book in the same manner as he speaks in public. It thus gives the impression that he is directly addressing the reader, without hiding himself behind posh vocabulary. One may even argue that such simplicity and honesty, whether in language or attitude, are the reasons why Young has been so popular for decades. Nevertheless, the vocabulary notwithstanding, the content of this book is far from what fans might have expected from a folk and rock 'n' roll star. For instance, we read little about his experience as an artist who participated in both Woodstock and Altamont festivals, which are events that marked the climax and subsequent fall of the "hippie dream" in 1969. It is all the more surprising as the latter quote is the subtitle of Neil Young's book: only a few chapters deal with such fashionable topics as the hippie era, like his arrival in California, his life in Los Angeles in the late 1960s, his Woodstock experience, or his involvement in the anti-war movement. Even the statement he made in his song "Ohio" against the Kent State University killing of four students in May 1970, shot dead by National Guard soldiers who were—for some of them, at least—younger than many demonstrators, is only briefly addressed. Although such themes are not entirely absent from this autobiography, they are not as central as one might have expected. One can still read enlightening facts and anecdotes, for instance about Woodstock, as Young explains the reason why he is not seen in the Festival's film while he was actually present onstage.

Nevertheless, more pages dedicated to such subjects would probably have been appreciated.

- 6 This autobiography is not, however, a mere memoir in which Neil Young settles the score with his past. It is a depiction of the Loner's state of mind and preoccupations at the time he was writing this book, rather than an excuse to simply go on a journey through the past. Indeed, as much as he thought of himself as an anti-war hippie in the late 1960s, Neil Young remains involved in various causes that matter to him today. These are the red threads at the core of his book, to such an extent that several times, the artist explains that he muses over writing other books completely about those particular subjects. They all have in common a concern for well-being, whether his own or others', but also a form of nostalgia, not only toward more elementary goods, but also better quality ones than those provided today.
- 7 The two main causes Neil Young fights for are the creation of a green, electric vehicle that would not only have a beautiful design and represent "the American Dream," but would also be very functional, as well as the return to better audio quality for music. Neil Young's fans are well aware that he collects big American cars, as many appear on his album covers. Therefore, it is not surprising to follow the creating process of the "Lincvolt," an electric car based on the design of a Lincoln Continental, and whose appearance would appeal to people who are concerned with protecting the environment but also crave a luxury car. The evolution of the making of this vehicle is an important part of this book. Neil Young is very convincing as an environmentally-responsible artist, which makes the subject of this car one of the most interesting ones in the entire book.
- 8 The other core subject is his concern for the loss of audio quality in the music industry, not only caused recently by mp3 and streaming records, but even earlier, with the creation of compact discs. Neil Young is very much concerned with the loss of quality of, and interest, in sound. He explains that "today, music is presented as an entertainment medium, like a game, without the full audio quality. It's like a cool pastime or a toy, not like a message to the soul" (13). However, one should not think of the Loner as someone living in the past, only wanting the return of vinyl for its own sake, even though he was one of the first artists to reissue many of his albums in high quality LPs with beautiful covers, inserts and inner posters. Rather, it seems that Young is obsessed with comfort and quality, even if he enjoys very much the freedom streaming music gives: listening to albums wherever and whenever one wishes to. Nevertheless, in that respect, *Waging Heavy Peace* can be considered as a journal about his struggle to create a high quality music format that would allow listeners to hear exactly what musicians produced in recording studios. We are thus allowed to read about his progress on the subject: as he tries to convince Ford's executive chairman to include Pono (Neil Young's new audio system) in his subsequent cars. The Loner also discusses a meeting organised with Apple (shortly before Steve Jobs' death) to convince them to offer users the ability to choose this Pono format when buying on iTunes, or another meeting with music companies' CEOs to ask them to offer the choice to future buyers between mp3 and lossless format. This part of the book is truly fascinating, and it brings hope to all those who complain about the end of audio quality. In that respect, Neil Young's musical approach is particularly coherent: not only does he allow fans to buy CDs and vinyl versions of most of his records, but also Blu-ray versions (a format he considers today to be the most faithful to original recordings) and digital versions, in

various formats. This matter seems to be at the core of Neil Young's musical work, as he has also started to organise and release his "Archives" in various volumes in these formats, the Blu-ray offering the most comprehensive content. Not unlike John Lennon, the Loner is someone who keeps everything, whether music, video, photos, etc. This titanic—that some call self-centered or even vain—enterprise follows the same ideal as *Waging Heavy Peace*, which is to offer high quality goods to the masses. And in that respect, this autobiography is a testimony to the intense work Young puts in everything he does.

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